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Technical Report

Report on
CHIKAN HANDICRAFT, LUCKNOW

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THE GIRI INSTITUTE OF DEVELOPMENT STUDIES
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I N T R O D U C T I O N

The Chikan is a fine art of embroidery made with white untwisted yarn with the help of a needle on a fine cloth. It is done on voile, silk, cambric, georgette, terry-cotton, etc. At first, designs are printed on the cloth with washable colours. This is a specialised job done by Chipis who use traditional wooden blocks. Once the design is printed, the garments are transferred from Chipi to the chikan workers for needle work. The main takas (stitches) of chikan are : Jali, Murri, Phanda, Bakhia, Hool, Keel, Tepachi, Dhoom, Joda-pattee, Ghas-pattee, Hath-katee, etc. Each stitch form has a wide variety of motifs. Quite a number of workers specialise in one of the stitch forms, but their proportion in the total workers is still quite low. Chikan embroidery is done on a number of products, such as kurta, tea-shirt, tops, table cloth, table mats, table runners, handkerchiefs and, of course, sarees and blouse-pieces.

Nothing is known about the persons who developed this particular form of embroidery; nor is it possible to give a firm date of its origin. However, the craft flourished during the days of Nawabs and Lucknow became known for its chikan works along with such other crafts as kamdani, zardozi, gota, etc. With the power passing into the hands of the British, impoverishment of the local ruling elite, and disappearance of Muslim in the face of low-priced textiles imported from England, the chikan craft languished.

Efforts to revive this industry were launched immediately on the attainment of Independence and the Directorate of Industries, Uttar Pradesh, set up the Government Chikan Embroidery Scheme in 1947. The three main objectives of the Scheme were (i) to provide regular employment to craftsmen on fair wages; (ii) to improve the standard of workmanship and (iii) to widen the market for these products in and outside India. Chikan Centres, which started functioning from 1952, were opened under the Scheme. Skilled workmen, after an ability test, were enlisted to Centres and their capacity was further improved by working under the guidance of the technical supervisors of the Centres. Workers report that the Scheme worked well. By the end of the Second Plan, a little more than 1,000 craftsmen were enrolled under the Scheme; and the annual value of production was about Rs.2 lakhs. This came to approximately 15 per cent of the pro-

duction organised under private agencies. During this period, chikan embroidery came to be performed on a number of new articles and not only white but coloured thread also began to be used in the embroidery. All these innovations enlarged the scope of the craft and directly benefited the workers.

But around 1959-60 indecision in regard to future policy toward chikan craft and the role of Chikan Centres crept in government circles. It was argued that the basic aim with which Centres were opened was to revive, develop and diversify the chikan work which had been accomplished. The Centres, therefore, could be wound up. In the specific context of the work organisation pattern in the craft which is characterised by the hold of indigenous money-lenders, wholesalers, and multiple tiers of middlemen over the workmen, it should be obvious as to who could have been at the back of such an argument and with what motive. But somehow the government of Uttar Pradesh fell in line with this argument. The need to curtail expenditure in the wake of China's aggression, as was then given out, compelled the government to close these Centres in 1964. Smt. Sucheta Kripalani was the Chief Minister then. Soon after, however, production unit was opened which produced goods for sale by the U.P. Government Handicrafts.

With the setting up of Government of U.P. Handicrafts Export Corporation in 1971, the chikan scheme of the Directorate of Industries has been suspended. This has not been very helpful to the workmen. The Export Corporation deals directly with the wholesaler-middlemen group for getting its supplies and is largely impervious to the deteriorating conditions of the craftsmen. Its working has actually further entrenched the middlemen.

The situation, as it exists today is one of sharp contrasts. The industry is growing in terms of output. But the working of the market is such that the producer-organiser's surplus has grown while the worker's earnings and their share in the produce have fallen. This has been due to following factors: (i) In an effort to keep the product prices from rising, the wholesalers and retailers commissioning the chikan work have been driven to tap sources of cheap labour which is available in nearby rural areas. It is estimated that about 27 per cent of the chikan workers today reside in rural areas surrounding Lucknow. (iv) Chikan patterns and stitches involving greater labour time and, therefore, causing product price to go up, are experiencing decrease in demand. These two factors will have a tendency to lower workers'

share and earnings, without necessarily increasing the surplus with the organiser-producer. But there are two additional factors which seem to be working positively for raising the latter's surplus. One is reduced emphasis on quality of work. This at once reduces the worker's share and raises the surplus, at the cost, no doubt, of the consumer. Another source of increased surplus is the policy pursued by the wholesalers and retailers in fixing the workers' remuneration on the basis of the prices of chikan products prevailing at Lucknow. These prices, due to market imperfections, are invariably lower than those prevailing in Centres outside Lucknow. The organiser-producers take advantage of the price-differentials while striking a bargain with the dealers from other states which provides them a clean surplus not to be shared with any one else. Thus, the present system of production and marketing is instrumental in raising the concentration of riches in the hands of a few accompanied with deprivation of mass of workers. The situation calls for urgent measures for amelioration of workers engaged in the craft.

II

SOCIAL BACKGROUND OF SAMPLE WORKERS

Chikan workers are almost all Muslim females and predominantly urban. Of the 200 workers interviewed only 3 have migrated into the city from outside : 2 from rural areas and 1 from urban area, outside Lucknow. The sex composition of the workers shows that only about 4.5 per cent of the workers are males and they are mainly engaged in processes incidental to chikan craft, such as stitching, washing and starching of garments and printing designs on the cloth.

About 15 per cent of the workers are children below age 14 years. For purposes of the present study we have interviewed only two children to note their special problems. Of the total workers interviewed, those in the age-group 14-18 years constitute 3 per cent; in age-group 18-40 years, about 72 per cent; in 40 to 60 years about 23 per cent and remaining 1 per cent belongs to the ages above 60 years. Age composition of the workers clearly shows a dominance of the relatively young -- those below 40 years constituting about 76 per cent of the total workers.

The urban background of the workers is reflected in the average size of their family. The average family is composed of only 4.38 members. That the families are poor is re-

flected in a high earner-dependent ratio which comes to about 1.3 per 1 dependent. Normally, it is the dependents which outnumber the earners.

Average family income of the workers is about Rs.161 per month, which means that per member income in an average family is about Rs.37 per month only -- an amount inadequate for meeting the bare subsistence requirements of the individuals. The average family income of the family exclusive of the earning from chikan work falls to about Rs.121 per month. As most of women workers participate in the craft due to economic compulsions, they are vulnerable to exploitation by middlemen.

A two-fold classification of workers' economic background in terms of below and above the poverty line has been made. The workers coming from families having less than Rs.40 per month as per member income have been considered as below the poverty line. The data collected reveals that about 58 per cent of the workers come from families existing below the poverty line. Of the remaining 84 workers, 48 come from families where per member income per month lies between Rs.40 and Rs.60; 21 come from families with per member income ranging between Rs.60 and Rs.80 and only 15 come from families where per member income per month exceeds Rs.80.

The heads of the households of chikan workers are engaged mainly in low-paying occupations. A break up of the heads of the households in terms of the Census Industry Divisions reveals that 55 per cent are engaged in processing and manufacture. Of these nearly half are engaged in chikan and zardozi works. Another 18 per cent are engaged in the service sector mostly as menials and in class IV jobs and 7 per cent are engaged in construction activities on casual basis. About 18 per cent are engaged in petty trade and in transport as rickshaw pullers. The remaining 2 per cent are engaged in activities allied to agriculture and some are unemployed also. All this background makes for a weak bargaining position of the workers.

In addition to the fact that most of the workers engaged in the craft are drawn from an unsatisfactory economic position, they are mostly illiterate and traditional workers committed to the craft. About 83 per cent of the workers are illiterate; 16 per cent have acquired learning upto Primary level; only 1 per cent have studied upto High School level. In their dealings with the wholesalers/retailers/contractors commissioning work, they suffer from an obvious handicap.

Learning new skills for augmenting income is also difficult. The need, therefore, is to give them functional education for improving their efficiency in the craft.

The need for working out solutions to their problems within the craft is all the more greater because about 80 per cent of them are traditional workers committed to the craft and are reluctant to take up to new occupation. Of the non-traditional workers about 2/3rd have entered the craft during the last five years and only 1/3rd have been in the craft for a longer period.

III

PRODUCTION AND MARKETING

The chikan craftsmen being mostly Muslim women, observing purdah and working at their houses, are not organised in cooperatives and they are seldom able to pursue the craft on their own (ie., on self-employed basis) either directly catering to the requirements of the consumer, or by producing the goods and making them available to the trader for sale to the consumer. The survey reveals that about 96 per cent of the workers are contract workers and rest of the 4 per cent include wage employees, self-employed (0.1 per cent) and the mixed category of self-employed-cum-contract workers (3.6 per cent).

The cloth, with necessary tailoring and printing of the designs with the help of wooden blocks and washable colours, is given to the individual craftsmen, either directly by wholesale merchants (15 per cent) or through contractors (79 per cent), and remuneration is paid to her on completion of the work and delivery of the article. The role of the Government is negligible : only 1 per cent workers report having got work from it. The goods are then placed in the market by producer-trader. The craftsmen find themselves at the mercy of the producer-trader-moneylender and the contractor and are deeply dissatisfied with the prevailing pattern of production and marketing in the craft.

An analysis of the production costs and returns brings out that cloth which is a raw material for the chikan embroidery claims about 72 per cent of the total investment and wages (both of producer-trader and the artisans) of which a part is usurped by the contractors, constitute no more than

23 per cent. Rest of the items of business expenses such as rent, transportation, marketing, storage, repair and depreciation, interest on borrowings, etc. constitute about 5 per cent in total expenses. Net surplus over investment comes to about 30 per cent.

The relationship between wages and profits both of which are retained in the craft provide a basis for estimating the net value added by the chikan industry. Net profits are about 24 per cent higher than the wage payments. Average wage (about Rs.28 per month) when multiplied by an estimated number of artisans engaged in the craft (45,000) yields an annual value of about Rs.1.51 crores. This figure when added to the derived profits of Rs.1.87 crores, gives the estimated value of production within the craft at Rs.3.38 crores. Allowing for the restrictions imposed by small size of the sample on which the above calculations are made, it may be safe to estimate annual value added by chikan craft at about Rs.3 crores.

IV

EMPLOYMENT AND EARNINGS

1. Employment

The total employment in chikan embroidery work, in combined rural and urban Lucknow, is estimated at 45,000 persons. Of these, about 31,000 to 35,000 live and work within the precincts of Lucknow Municipal Corporation.

As pointed out earlier, an overwhelming proportion of workers engaged in the craft are females (about 96 per cent). The 4 per cent of males are largely engaged in processes incidental to embroidery, such as, cutting, printing, sewing, washing, starching, folding, etc.

The women engaged in this craft may largely be categorised as 'secondary' workers in the sense that they combine 'gainful' work with their primary role as home makers and do not wish to go outside in search of gainful employment. Out of 200 workers interviewed, as many as 92 per cent reported that they cannot work outside their homes. It is partly to this characteristic that the perpetuation of low earnings and the failure of efforts to organise them may be traceable. Besides, this characteristic renders precise measurement of the

extent of underemployment in this craft difficult, because the norm of eight hours work-a-day cannot be uniformly applied.

For this reason estimates of underemployment in this craft have been worked out here on two alternative assumptions of 6 hours and 8 hours of work-a-day. Number of days for which work should be available for the workers is estimated to be 25. To be fully engaged under our assumptions, a worker would require work for 150 hours in a month under the criterion of 6 hours and 200 hours under that of 8 hours. As against this, an average worker works for about 107 hours in a month which yields the extent of underemployment, under the norm of 6 hours, at 29 per cent and under the norm of 8 hours, at 47 per cent.

A break-up of workers according to the number of hours for which they get work per day shows that about 84 per cent work for less than eight hours. An average worker gets work for only about 18 days in a month.

The level of underemployment together with the expected rate of entry of workers in the chikan both need be considered for formulating targets in respect of employment-creation in this craft.

Employment opportunities have not expanded at the same rate as the growth of workers in the craft. As a result, during the last three years an average worker has experienced a decline by about 25 per cent in the number of days for which work is available. Only about 27 per cent of the workers report that there has been no change in the days of work.

2. Earnings

It needs be emphasised that a policy aimed at creating fuller opportunity for work would not, in itself, be sufficient to alleviate the suffering of the craftsmen. It is essentially a low productivity and a low earning craft. Average monthly income of a worker is about Rs.28 only. Per hour average earning of a wage employee is as low as only 13 paise, it rises to 24 paise in case of contract worker, is 45 paise in case of contract-cum-self-employed worker and rises to Rs.2 for the self-employed. Self-employment thus, provides highest income of workmen. All the workers have reported that work on own account yields highest earnings. The rise in per hour earnings consistently with the rise in the status of workmen

clearly suggests that together with the nature of the craft, the mode of work-organisation with several layers of intermediary interest is also responsible for workers' low earnings. It needs, therefore, be pointed out that the policy for promoting employment will have to be supplemented with schemes designed to bring the actual craftsmen in direct contact with the buyer, if the former is not to benefit only the rich and exploitative middlemen.

The effect of middlemen is seen clearly in the earning differentials of workmen in terms of the agency which commissions their skills. Work directly from the wholesalers provides to a workman a monthly earning of about Rs.38 while that from contractors provides only about Rs.19 and from government agency about Rs.28. The implications of these differentials in monthly earnings for policy should be obvious.

The earning differentials are favourable to workmen who have direct contact with wholesalers for two reasons. One, because wholesalers provide more regular work. Secondly, and more important, the rates of payment for same work on the same product are lower when work is received through the contractor rather than from the wholesaler. For work on a saree, the wholesaler pays about Rs.17 while the contractor pays only about Rs.9 to the workmen. For a Kurta the wholesaler pays about Rs.5, whereas, the contractor pays only about Rs.4. We have not worked out rate differentials for processes on any other products. But these examples are enough to indicate the extent to which workers' legitimate earnings get eroded due to the middlemen influence.

Not only are earnings of the workers low, increasing competition among them coupled with the trader-producers' efforts to uncover cheaper sources of labour in nearby rural areas, they are also dwindling. The monthly earnings of an average worker have fallen from about Rs.33 in 1973 to about Rs.28 in 1974.

3. Deductions in Payments

Deductions are not made for delay, nor do the workers complain of defective calculations. The main reason due to which deductions are made is bad craftsmanship. Sometimes no wages are paid in such cases. In a few cases workers are asked to do the stitching work again without any payment. In cases when cloth is lost or damaged (36 cases) the full cost of cloth

is recovered from the worker. Normally, Rs.10-15 are recovered for a Kurta cloth while for a saree this amount always exceeds Rs.20.

Payment is made mostly at the time of delivery of finished article(s). Wage employees are all piece-rated.

V

WORKERS' PROBLEMS AND NEEDS

As the workers in the craft are mostly Purdah women, they are not amenable to any collective organisation, like a cooperative or a trade union. The cooperatives do not exist at all and have no role in the field of production and marketing. One trade union exists only in name, as only less than 1 per cent workers reported as being its members and none reported as having derived any benefit from it.

Workers have considerable complaints against and disputes with the agency providing work to them. These disputes are mostly of individual rather than collective nature. The most common cause of dispute, affirmed by about 51 per cent of our respondents, relates to the decision of the work-giving agency in regard to the quality of embroidery done by workers -- whether it is good or bad. Disputes also arise with respect to the amounts of deductions that are made against 'loss of materials'. Some thirty five per cent also reported disputes due to low rates of remuneration. About 18 per cent complained of late payments, as well.

Workers wanting to become self-employed constitute a very low percentage of the sample (14.00). Average estimated value of assistance required by a craftsman to enable him to become 'self-employed', in aggregate, comes approximately to Rs.5,000.

The overwhelming proportion, however, showed their inability to take up work on own account and wanted certain measures to be taken for ameliorating their lot, providing them with more work and fuller employment and ensuring adequate protection from the unbridled exploitation by the various agencies. Workers wanted adequate and effective measures for improving the wage rate and the system of wage payment. Nearly 80 per cent emphasised the need for raising the level of pro-

duction so that they could get more work and about 60 per cent wanted opening up of chikan centres by the Government. About 35 per cent wanted elimination of intermediaries.

It is significant to note that the craftsmen do not repose any faith in the cooperatives as an institution for the carrying out of some of the aforementioned suggestions. This is mainly attributable to the fact whatever cooperatives were formed in the past were too weak and superficial in the sense that mass of the craftsmen remained out of it, and invariably came to be dominated by the exploiting elements and used as an instrument to extract facilities and concessions from the government for their own benefit only. The craftsmen, therefore, look to the Government for directly organising production and marketing or working out standardised minimum rates of payment for different quality of work and implementing it through its Inspection Staff.

VI

SUGGESTIONS

From the foregoing discussions the following suggestions emerge:

1. Most important, efforts should be made to substitute the existing mode of work organisation characterised by multiplicity of intermediary interest by an alternative mode which could render them superfluous. Here, the effort should be directed primarily to undermining the pivotal role of the wholesalers. This should not be sought to be accomplished by trying to encourage cooperatives; efforts for organising workers in cooperatives has been made earlier and has failed. One or two cooperatives which exist are so only in name. In practice, cooperatives would only help to acquire control of the production through the backdoor. There is, therefore, a need to set up a Chikan Production and Sales Corporation. Its administrative costs should not be allowed to exceed the current governmental margin of 10 per cent to 16 per cent. It would enter the production sphere in a big way to shake out, through competition, the wholesalers from his entrenched position.

2. Efforts should be made to widen the market and step up the rate of growth of output so as to provide full-time employment to chikan workers. This can be done by extending the market to wider geographical areas and also by increasing the variety of products with chikan embroidery. Full-time employment to chikan workers should raise their monthly earnings at least by 40 per cent at current levels of productivity and existing mode of work-organisation.
3. Attainment of full-time objective for this segment of labour force in next 5 years would require the annual rate of growth of employment to be maintained either at 8.9 per cent or at 11.9 per cent. However, if this objective is sought to be accomplished in next ten years, then the employment will have to grow at the annual rate of 6.4 to 7.9 per cent.
4. Together with changing the mode of work-organisation, there is a need for introducing greater rationality in rates of remuneration for different processes. The basis of rate structure should be relative labour-time involved in doing a process on a standard area. Workers engaged in 'ulti-bakhia', particularly, complained of their low rates relatively to other processes on the ground that their work involved greater intricacy and more labour time.
5. Minimum Wages Act should be extended to cover workers in this craft. But this should be avoided unless our recommendation under (2) above is implemented. Because, first, it would be difficult to implement them in the existing conditions. And, secondly, with each layer in the market organisation retaining its own margins, it would only push up the product prices. The policy should be to push up the earnings without revising the rates upwards. The rates should be revised upward only when the productivity rises.
6. Attempt should be made to encourage research in developing newer techniques and designs for doing embroidery while maintaining the distinctive aspects of chikan craft. Stitching manually with the help of a needle puts strain on the eyes of the craftsmen and does not leave much scope for improving workers' productivity. Handicrafts Board has a useful role to play in this connection. It can help develop simple

tools which could be used with or without power to enable the workers to raise their productivity.

7. Efforts should be made to open sales stalls at Indian Embassies abroad and major railway platforms and aerodromes in collaboration with other State Governments. Arrangements should be formalised with Handicrafts Emporia of the different States, on mutual accommodation basis, to provide for sales counters for chikan products.

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